

APPENDIX 3 -- Substantial Changes to the Belgic Confession, 1561 to the Present

N.B.: this is not a comprehensive list -- rather it highlights some of the more noteworthy changes.

Changes Prior to 1944

Synod of Antwerp 1566

- Article 5 was revised to add a third function of Scripture: “confirming of our faith.”¹
- “Proceeding from the Father and the Son” was added to article 8. Gootjes deemed this a “theologically significant addition.”²
- Eight changes were made to article 15.³ Two of the more substantial:
 - A phrase was added, “...nor entirely eradicated, seeing that, as from an evil well, bubbles continually flow from it.”
 - Another insertion involved an additional result of original sin: “not in order that they would fall asleep, but...”
- Article 16 saw two substantial changes:⁴
 - The statement “the fall into which they had fallen” was replaced with “the fall into which they had thrown themselves.”
 - The Synod removed an entire paragraph (except one sentence) defending the doctrine of predestination.
- The Synod made many changes to article 36. One “substantial addition” identified by Gootjes was the addition of an explicit denunciation of the Anabaptists.⁵

Synod of Dort 1618-19

- As a result of objections made by the Remonstrants, changes were made to many articles, many either cosmetic in nature or related to formulations.⁶ Two examples are identified by Gootjes as more substantial:
 - “Almighty” was added to article 1.
 - “Preservation” was added in article 2, “...by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe.” “More clearly and fully” was added also.
- Article 22 contains one of the most significant revisions. At issue was the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, a doctrine denied by the German theologian Johannes Piscator. His teaching on this point had already been ruled heterodox by the French and

¹ Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 122.

² Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, 123.

³ Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, 124-125.

⁴ Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, 126-127.

⁵ Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, 127-131.

⁶ Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, 153-158.

the English. The Synod of Dort followed suit by adding these words (in bold) to article 22, "...and as many holy works as he has done for us **and in our place.**"⁷

Synod of Utrecht 1905

- A group of theologians (including Abraham Kuyper) proposed a change to article 36 so that this article would better conform to scriptural teaching about the civil government.⁸ As a result, these words were deleted: "all idolatry and false worship may be removed and prevented, the kingdom of antichrist may be destroyed." In a discussion of this change, Dr. J. Faber commented (bold added), "Let us not return to 1561; let us also not undo the decision of 1905 – as some of our Dutch brothers propose – **but let us rewrite the entire third passage of Article 36 of our Belgic Confession.**"⁹

CanRC Changes

Synod Cloverdale 1983

- Though this change was not officially decided upon by Synod Cloverdale 1983, after this Synod, our edition of the Belgic Confession somehow received this wording for an additional title, "True Christian Confession Containing the Summary of the Doctrine of the God and of the Eternal Salvation of Man." The 1561 Confession had "...Eternal Salvation of the Soul." The Committee proposal had "True Christian Confession of the Canadian Reformed Churches...and of the Eternal Salvation of Souls"¹⁰ The text of the Confession published in the Acts had "True Christian Confession According to the Belgic Confession..."¹¹
- The committee proposed a change to article 1: "To change the beginning of Art. 1 in order to take away the expression 'one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God.' The majority of the Committee felt that this formulation can give rise to the wrong idea that we call the LORD 'God' in our own initiative. One member was of the opinion that the present text expresses well what the believers, taking into account the limitations of human language and mind, can say about God who nature is inexpressible. The Committee proposes to read, 'We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is only one God, who is a simple and spiritual Being..."¹² Synod

⁷ Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, 151-152.

⁸ Wes Bredenhof, *For the Cause of the Son of God: The Missionary Significance of the Belgic Confession* (Fellsmere: Reformation Media and Press, 2011), 192-193.

⁹ J. Faber, "The Civil Government in Article 36 B.C.," *Clarion* 28.24 (December 1, 1979): 512. Some twenty years later, Faber was speaking along similar lines: "The Canadian Reformed Churches have modernized the English text and in the course of this process they have even made some changes in the content of the confessions." See J. Faber, "The Confessional History of the Canadian Reformed Churches," *Clarion* 48.4 (February 19, 1999): 80.

¹⁰ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 150.

¹¹ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 151.

¹² *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 150.

apparently approved this change and decided that this change was of such weight that it merited informing “the churches abroad.”¹³

- In article 4, Synod Cloverdale decided to take over the suggestion of Synod Smithville to remove Hebrews as a book written by Paul.¹⁴ Synod apparently approved the addition of Lamentations as well, a change which had been proposed by the committee.¹⁵ Synod decided that also this change was of such significance that it merited notifying the “churches abroad.”¹⁶
- Several changes were made to article 9, and these changes too were considered significant enough to notify our sister churches.¹⁷
 - A reference to 1 John 5:7 was dropped “because of the testimony of the manuscripts (see newer Bible translations).”¹⁸
 - “Especially those towards us” was changed to “especially those we perceive in ourselves.”
 - “Always been maintained in” was changed to “always been maintained and preserved.”¹⁹
- Another important change (worthy of informing sister churches) was in article 10. Two Scripture texts were replaced, since the Committee felt that the original texts did not support the doctrine in question.
- Article 15 was changed from “that the believers may sleep in their sin” to “that the believers may sleep peacefully in their sin.”²⁰
- Synod Cloverdale decided to put the words deleted by Synod Utrecht 1905 into a footnote.²¹
- The Synod decided to reinsert the conclusion of article 37, “Amen, Come Lord Jesus” from Rev. 22:20.²²

Other Reformed Changes

The Canadian Reformed Churches are not the only ones who have made changes to the Belgic Confession. The following are some representative examples of other churches that have different forms of the Confession.

¹³ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 140.

¹⁴ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 138. Cf. *Acts of Synod Smithville*, 92.

¹⁵ For the Committee report recommendation see *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 150.

¹⁶ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 140.

¹⁷ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 140.

¹⁸ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 150.

¹⁹ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 138.

²⁰ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 139. This change (and the following two) were also considered significant enough to warrant notifying the sister churches.

²¹ *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 140.

²² *Acts of Synod Cloverdale*, 140.

RCUS on article 15

- The RCUS has made a change to article 15. Our edition says regarding original sin: “It is not abolished nor eradicated even by baptism, for sin continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source.” However, the edition of the RCUS says (bold added): “Nor is it altogether abolished or wholly eradicated even by **regeneration**; since sin always issues forth from this woeful source, as water from a fountain...” “Baptism” has been replaced by “regeneration.” It is not immediately clear why this change was made. The change has no basis in the original 1561 text, in the French or Dutch texts adopted by the Synod of Dort, or in the Latin text commissioned by Dort.

URCNA, RCUS, FRCNA (etc.) on article 29

- The CanRC edition reads regarding the true church, “It practices the pure preaching of the gospel...” Most other English editions read (bold added), “If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached **therein...**” The word “therein” did not appear in the original Belgic Confession of 1561. It also never appears in any subsequent French, Dutch, or Latin editions. “Therein” seems to be appear out of thin air in the English edition adopted by the Reformed Dutch Church in the United States of America (now known as the Reformed Church of America) in 1792. It has remained with most English versions ever since.²³ Why or how it was originally added is unclear. What is clear is that this word became a substantial issue in debates about the missionary relevance of the Belgic Confession in the Christian Reformed Church.²⁴

URCNA, RCUS, FRCNA (etc.) on article 30

- Article 30 speaks about the government of the church. Most English editions read: “the true religion may be preserved and the true doctrine everywhere propagated.” This is essentially a translation of the Latin text commissioned by the Synod of Dort 1618-19. However, Dort adopted French and Dutch texts and these are followed by the CanRC edition: “By these means they preserve the true religion; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course...” There is a difference here in formulation, although it can be argued that the meaning is the same.²⁵

NRC, HRC, FRCNA on article 36

- The change to article 36 was made at Synod Utrecht 1905 of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN). The GKN was formed at the Union of 1892 – Doleantie and Secession churches joined in one federation. However, there were Secession churches

²³ For some discussion of this change, see Wes Bredenhof, *To Win Our Neighbors for Christ: the Missiology of the Three Forms of Unity* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 26-28.

²⁴ Bredenhof, *For the Cause of the Son of God*, 238.

²⁵ For the argument, see Bredenhof, *To Win Our Neighbors for Christ*, 29.

that did not join the Union of 1892. Reformed churches with their roots only in the Secession (and not the Union) have not deleted the words in question.

Conclusion

Why is this material relevant to the proposal at hand?

1. **Many** substantial changes have been made to our confessions over the centuries, but the Belgic Confession has seen the most. One might ask why. The answer is that it is our pre-eminent “defining confession.” Its main purpose is to define what we believe. The Catechism is primarily a teaching tool. The Canons of Dort explain some points of the Confession and Catechism in response to the Remonstrants. However, the Confession is where the boundaries of our faith are most clearly laid out. Hence, it would make sense that the most substantial changes have been with this document.
2. Through history, Reformed churches have not regarded the Belgic Confession to be an historical document that must never be changed. In fact, **many** changes have been made in response to historical circumstances. Moreover, history relates that, on occasion, those who have resisted confessional revision either did so naively as a conservative reaction or with an agenda. For instance, between 1950 and 1970, the Christian Reformed Church saw a polarization develop between those who wanted confessional revision (along with full, strict, and honest subscription) and those who wanted to maintain the confessions as historical documents (with an ambiguous view of subscription at best).²⁶
3. Theologians of the past have been quite willing to suggest changing the Confession when the need existed. Above we have already noted Dr. Abraham Kuyper and Dr. Jelle Faber. In addition, we can note Dr. Klaas Schilder. He said, “Every confession is capable of being revised. Of course, not every three years. It is a sign of impotence that we are still unable to do that. We have clung too much to traditions and had too little opportunity for study.”²⁷
4. Some might be concerned that changing our edition of the Confession will create difficulties in working with sister churches which use the same forms of unity but have not adopted our changes. As we have shown, many such small differences already exist and these have not prevented us from working together. Further, mission churches are not negatively affected by this. They can also make up their own minds about which confessional emendations will be most fitting or necessary for their own situations.
5. Already in the time the Belgic Confession was first written, there were confessional differences amongst Reformed churches from various nations. The original Belgic Confession was modelled on the French Confession of 1559, yet the Reformed Churches of the Low Countries did not feel bound to have a confession that was identical to that of the French churches.

²⁶ Bredenhof, *For the Cause of the Son of God*, 236-242.

²⁷ Quoted by J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1996), 69.

6. We have always recognized that only the Word of God is infallible and unchangeable. The confessions of the church need to reflect the teaching of the Word of God in ways that are relevant to the life of the church. If there is an obvious need to make a change, the change can and must be made.
7. The question then is not: **can** we make any changes to the Belgic Confession? History shows many instances where changes have been made. The question is: is this issue of such a weight and significance that a change **should** or **even must** be made to the Confession? We believe that our proposal demonstrates that this issue holds enormous consequences and therefore an addition to address the issue is warranted.